

Wheat pennies aren't edible or worth a mint

By Roger Boye

This week's column answers more questions from Chicago Tribune readers.

Q—I've seen a reference to rare "wheat pennies." What are they? How much are they worth? Can they be eaten?

W.P., Chicago

A—"Wheaties" are Lincoln cents minted between 1909 and 1958, so called because they depict two ears of wheat on the tails side. In 1959, officials replaced that design with a rendition of the Lincoln Memorial to mark the 150th anniversary of Lincoln's birth.

Although wheat cents rarely turn up in change, many have little value on the hobby market [and they taste awful!]. Most worn specimens from the 1940s and 1950s, for example, retail for about five cents each and wholesale for less than two cents.

Some of the earlier dates fetch much higher prices, of course, with one variety of the 1909-S in "good condition" retailing for at least \$200.

Q—We'd like to buy three Confederate coins to go with the Confederate bills that we plan to give to the grandchildren. How much should we expect to pay?

R.T., Wheaton

A—Plenty. Although the Confederacy issued \$2 billion or more of paper money between 1861 and 1865, it authorized the production of only 16 coins—four half dollars and 12 one-cent pieces. Just one of them probably would cost you at least \$10,000.

Q—I've found a 1970 quarter that appears to be made of silver. Among other things, there's no telltale copper streak around the edge. Did the government issue a 1970 silver coin in error?

J.R., Walworth, Wis.

A—No. Most likely, someone plated your coin with silver or other substance and, as such, it would have no special value to a collector. Uncle Sam has produced copper-nickel clad quarters for circulation since 1965.

Q—Should the old coins I have be cleaned in any way? They have been stored for many years and are very dark.

S.A., Evanston

A—Don't try to clean your coins, even with soap and water. Most collectors prefer to own rarities that are in their natural state of preservation; specimens cleaned by amateurs often become marred with unsightly streaks and smudges.